COMMISSIONER’S VOICE

Working with Veterans and our Native American Tribal Programs

As we close out 2017, we can’t help thinking about what matters most in our lives. Many of us are celebrating the holidays, gathering with loved ones, and enjoying perhaps one too many of our favorite indulgences — something I may have done on several occasions! But that’s what New Year’s resolutions are for, as we all know.

It’s easy to get caught up in the stress of getting everything we want or need to do packed in before the year ends. We can lose perspective if we’re not paying attention. So it becomes all the more important to remember to slow down, reflect, and show gratitude.

As I look back over the past year, I am reminded of how fortunate we are to serve those who need our help. I reflect on the words of the late John F. Kennedy who said, “As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” I’ve been so excited to get to know many of you in the larger community of child support professionals over the past few months. Across the federal and state landscapes, thanks to your tireless work, our efforts improve the lives of at least 1 in 5 children. I never thought I would be a part of a team whose impact touched so many.

Your dedication and combined expertise has resulted in some important contributions this year. OCSE finalized revisions to the intergovernmental forms and developed a four-part training series. We also created a training series for the rollout of the Hague Convention. This nine-part series includes presentation materials, train-the-trainer tools, and other information about implementation. Additionally, we published our Veterans Toolkit, “Child Support Collaborations to Engage and Assist Veterans,” an outreach resource to assist veterans in the child support caseload.

These completed projects can help caseworkers and those in the field deliver even better services to parents and children. I’m very proud of you and your accomplishments, big and small, in the past year. Our success as a team starts and ends with appreciating and recognizing each other. I’m grateful to enjoy an open dialogue with many of you already and look forward to finding more ways to engage with you.

continued

The Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe tribal programs had a joint workshop to update their separate child support guidelines. Read about it on page 6.
Lessons Learned from Behavioral Interventions

Research in behavioral science has shown that small changes in the environment can make it easier for people to act and make decisions that support their goals. The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project was the first major effort to apply behavioral insights to the human services programs that serve poor and vulnerable families in the United States.

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation of the Administration for Children and Families launched BIAS in 2010 to learn how tools from behavioral science could be used to deliver human services more efficiently and effectively to low-income children, adults, and families. BIAS conducted 15 randomized controlled trials of behavioral interventions across eight states. About half of these tests related to child support (other sites focused on child care and on work supports). The BIAS team worked with three states to design the eight tests related to child support, focusing on two issues: child support order modifications and collection of payments.

To find out what they learned, read the new issue brief Behavioral Insights for Child Support: Lessons from the BIAS Project. Visit our website for more information about OCSE's Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS).

White House Proclamation for Veterans and Military Families

President Donald Trump proclaimed November 2017 as National Veterans and Military Families Month. The proclamation asks everyone to “… renew our Nation’s commitment to support veterans and military families.” Read the full text on the White House website.

Updates from Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands

The impact of hurricanes Irma and Maria on Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands was unimaginable. Child support staff in both locations are diligently working to return to normal services, but delays in restoring electricity and telecommunications continue to complicate these efforts. The Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico child support agencies continue to collect and distribute child support payments while many of their employees and customers attempt to rebuild their lives. Both agencies are committed to continuing to provide child support services; however, they ask for your understanding during these delays.

Have a safe and happy New Year!

Scott Lekan
January 1, 2018, will mark the one-year anniversary of the Hague Child Support Convention going into effect for the U.S. While negotiating and joining the Convention took many years (see sidebar for historical articles), it was worth the wait. U.S. participation in the Convention is a giant step forward, as states increasingly serve more families that are spread across international borders.

Hague Convention countries

One of the benefits of joining the Convention was that our bilateral agreements with several countries transformed into Convention partnerships. The United Kingdom and Poland fall into this category. It also instantly added reciprocity with numerous new countries, such as many of the European Union nations.

Over the past year, additional countries have joined, including Brazil — the first South American nation. As of November 1, 2017, there are 36 Hague Convention countries including the U.S. We expect this number to continue to grow. For example, Canada recently signaled their intent to join the Convention.

Implementation

When the U.S. ratified the Hague Convention, we hit the ground running to execute the new processes. Over the past year, we produced and posted nine caseworker training modules to the OCSE website, complete with recordings and resource material. We also cleared and published the Hague Convention forms for states to use, developed additional website resources such as forms translation and language requirements, and fielded questions from states, countries, and parents.

Looking ahead, OCSE is preparing training for our judicial partners who have to learn the requirements of the new international child support landscape. We are also working on international policy to bolster the training materials.

Aside from the Convention, the U.S. maintains bilateral reciprocal relationships with several other key international partners, such as Australia, Canada, and Switzerland. Counting those countries and our Convention partners, we now have reciprocity with over 50 nations and Canadian provinces. In this era of globalization and mobility, U.S. child support can serve more families so children at home and abroad receive the critical support they need.
Changes Coming to TRICARE

TRICARE is the health care program for uniformed service members and their families. Some TRICARE plans will change starting January 1, 2018. Visit the TRICARE website to see how costs, enrollment periods, and other coverage benefits may change in 2018 and 2019.

SPOTLIGHT — VETERAN & MILITARY FAMILIES

Toolkit can Help Serve Veterans with Child Support Debt

James Murray, OCSE

Homeless veterans have told the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for nearly a decade that legal help for child support issues is one of their highest unmet needs. Through Project CHALENG (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups), the VA asks veterans, VA staff, and community partners to conduct periodic surveys to gauge homeless veterans’ needs. Then it helps build community-focused partnerships to create solutions to those needs. According to the 2017 Project CHALENG fact sheet, that legal help for child support issues ranked fourth for male veterans and seventh for female veterans.

The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement launched a pilot project with the VA and the American Bar Association in 2010 to help homeless veterans manage their child support debt as a strategy to help them qualify for permanent housing. Nine pilot sites across the country formed collaborations between child support, legal services, and veterans service organizations. The groups sponsored events designed to bring in homeless veterans so they could work through the obstacles keeping them from permanent housing. By the end of the nearly two-year project, child support staff resolved nearly $800,000 in state-owed child support debt. They also gained valuable experience about reaching veterans and tips on managing and closing complex, interstate cases.

We outlined the lessons learned in a new toolkit, Child Support Collaborations to Engage and Assist Veterans. It offers information you can use to help the veterans in your caseloads.

For more information about the Veterans Toolkit, contact OCSE.DPI@acf.hhs.gov.
From Healing To Wellness in the Penobscot Nation

Eric Mehnert, Chief Judge, in collaboration with Awendela Dana, Child Support Program Coordinator, Penobscot Nation

The Penobscot Nation Tribal Court, located in Maine, runs a grant-funded Healing to Wellness program to help adults and juveniles who need extra assistance working on wellness. The culturally based program is available to Penobscot Nation tribal members who are involved or risk becoming involved in the court system, and who are struggling with alcohol or substance abuse. The Penobscot Nation Child Support Agency was one of the first organizations to begin referring parents to the program.

The Healing to Wellness Program braids together a variety of local treatment and support resources for a holistic, culturally grounded healing approach for people fighting drug and alcohol use or abuse and who may also be struggling with mental health issues.

The Healing to Wellness Team is composed of many members. The team meets every other Wednesday to discuss the participants' achievements and challenges using a shared decision making process.

On the Friday following the Wellness Team meeting, every participant attends Wellness Court. The courtroom is set up in a semi-circle with the judge presiding from the bench. During court, the judge asks participants how each one is doing, and then offers positive reinforcement for their achievements toward recovery. Then each team member can speak to the participants and offer praise for constructive actions. Once the Wellness Team has offered its positive reinforcement, the other wellness participants are encouraged to offer words of encouragement to their peers, which has been a constructive experience for them.

The child support agency staff was one of the first agencies on the reservation to recognize the benefits of using judicial oversight with local healing to wellness services to help individuals recovering from addiction. They understood that it is ineffective to repeatedly summon individuals to court who were battling addiction and unable to pay child support. Working collaboratively with the court, the agency became one of the first entry points into the Wellness Program. We knew that people could not pay child support if they were not sober, healthy, and employed. As the wellness participant achieves sobriety, the child support staff works collaboratively with the court to set up a plan for the parent to start paying child support.

For more information about the Healing to Wellness program, contact Case Manager Brianna Tipping at Brianna.Tipping@penobscotnation.org.

Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas
Trunk or Treat

The program combines the judicial oversight and power of the court with local healing and wellness services to help people achieve sobriety, avoid recidivism, and address co-occurring substance abuse or mental health issues. Every team member is committed to ensuring the participant's progress toward a healthy life and productive position within the Penobscot Community.
Tribes Benefit from Joint Guidelines Review

Jane Venohr, Economist/Research Associate, Center for Policy Research, Carmen Thomas, Director, Eastern Shoshone Child Support Program, and Chad Edinger, Program Specialist, OCSE

With massive energy and passion, two tribal child support programs met in late October to discuss economics and child support guidelines in the spirit of helping tribal children and families. To kick off a nearly three-day workshop, the child support administrators and staff of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe and Northern Arapaho Tribe discussed the economic realities in their communities. Then they reviewed some actual child support cases and talked about how they would apply their tribe’s child support guidelines to these cases. The workshop helped identify best practices and guideline areas that they could improve, and they discovered a common bond in their desire to help tribal children and strengthened their professional relationship and collaboration.

Bringing two tribes together

The Eastern Shoshone Tribe and the Northern Arapaho Tribe have separate child support programs but very similar child support guidelines. Together, they own and live on the Wind River Reservation of west-central Wyoming. Recognizing the similarities in their guidelines and common program goals, Eastern Shoshone Child Support Program Director Carmen Thomas invited the Northern Arapaho Child Support Program to participate in a guidelines workshop.

Thomas initiated the workshop after hearing Dr. Jane Venohr, an economist with the Center for Policy Research, present at OCSE’s Region 8 Tribal Directors Meeting in May 2017. Federal regulations require that every state and tribe with an approved comprehensive child support program review their child support guidelines at least every four years. Regional staff invited Dr. Venohr to facilitate the conversation with the tribal directors because she has helped several states with periodic guidelines reviews.

Real life helps shape the conversation

They began the workshop with each person telling the story of their childhood: where they grew up, the conditions of their housing, what they ate, and how their family obtained food — from grocery stores, gardens, hunting, and government commodity food programs, for example. Many of the participants had lived in poverty or on the verge of it. They shared these nostalgic, bittersweet, and empowering details so Dr. Venohr could better understand the cost of living on the reservation because economic data about tribal members is limited.

Successful takeaways

By the end of the workshop, participants identified suitable criteria for imputing income and the appropriate circumstances to apply a minimum order. For example, the staff would recommend a minimum order of say $50 per month to an obligated minor parent who is still attending school. They also developed an individualized approach to considering an obligated parent’s basic subsistence needs in the child support calculation.

In all, they identified important nuances that do three things: make the application of the child support guidelines and child support order appropriate for the case; serve the best interests of the child; and produce greater consistency and predictability in guidelines applications. Ultimately, both tribes took another significant step toward breaking the cycle of children growing up without the support they need and deserve!

For details about the tribal workshop, contact Carmen Thomas at cthomas@easternshoshone.org. Chad Edinger, at Chad.Edinger@acf.hhs.gov, can provide specifics about the Region 8 directors meeting. For information about periodic guideline reviews, contact Dr. Venohr at jvenohr@centerforpolicyresearch.org.
More Native American Children Live with One Parent

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 47% of Native American children under the age of 18 live with one parent. The data comes from the Census Bureau’s American FactFinder Table, Children Characteristics, 2016 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

Cherokee Nation Child Support Services — 10 Years of Success

Shruthi Shankar, Intern, OCSE

Since the Cherokee Nation Office of Child Support Services opened its doors in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, in July 2007, it has collected and distributed an average of $3.2 million per year to tribal families. The staff serves residents from 14 counties in northeastern Oklahoma and handles more than 2,000 active cases. They also hold an average of nine monthly tribal and state dockets throughout their jurisdictional boundaries. The program aims to not only maintain accurate child support orders and reduce unmanageable child support debt but also help improve family relationships and promote positive parental engagement in Cherokee families. The program believes that child support is more than just the monthly financial support; it takes lots of other resources to provide for a child.

Building their program

For many years, Cherokee Nation citizens relied on state agencies and the Chickasaw Nation to assist them with child support matters. Because the Cherokee people as a whole believe that children are their future, tribal leaders wanted to establish their own federally recognized child support office so they could help their families directly.

Child Support Services Director Kara Whitworth said their goal in opening their own office was simple. They wanted to assist Indian children who were entitled to court-ordered child support, but needed to ensure there was a legal and organizational way to do so that also protected their sovereignty, customs, and family values.

Supporting their culture

The child support office strives to create a stronger community and family identity by promoting household economic stability, providing early intervention and education programs, and maintaining financial resources for Cherokee families. In 2014, the office applied successfully for one of the first five grants that OCSE offered exclusively to tribal child support programs.

They used the Tribal Innovation Grant funding to create a parenting curriculum titled Cherokee Nation Building Blocks. It provides a culturally relevant resource for Cherokee parents and educates them on topics such as the child support legal processes, paternity establishment benefits, and child support guidelines. They also learn successful co-parenting tips. During the class, parents also receive information on proper budgeting techniques. The staff hopes that the Cherokee Nation Commerce program materials motivate new clients to include child support into their monthly budget. Class participants receive a resource guide of Cherokee Nation services and a dual Cherokee/English language children’s storybook.

Applying child support payments to college savings

The child support office broadened its services in 2016 by becoming the first child support partner to launch the Oklahoma Native Assets Coalition, a program that helps Native parents save for their children’s education. According to a story in the May 2016 Child Support Report, the program puts a seed of $100 into a special iSave savings account for a child’s future college expenses. iSave is open to parents in the child support caseload who meet specific criteria. In the spirit of parental cooperation, both the mother and father must approve their child’s enrollment, and both parents can contribute to the tax-deductible 529 account.

iSave and Building Blocks show how much the Cherokee Nation’s child support program has grown in the last 10 years. Whitworth believes that her office now operates with the entire picture in mind. The staff understands that child support is about more than collecting money. As a result, the office has expanded its efforts to promoting overall Cherokee family welfare, both for today and for the future.

For information on this program, contact childsupport1@cherokee.org.

More Native American Children Live with One Parent

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 47% of Native American children under the age of 18 live with one parent. The data comes from the Census Bureau’s American FactFinder Table, Children Characteristics, 2016 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.
Did you know civilian employers reported 65.6 million new hires in fiscal year 2016? Accurate data is important because it helps child support agencies establish, modify, and enforce child support orders. Employers report their information to a State Directory of New Hires, and then the state transmits it to the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH). Federal agencies report directly to the NDNH.

While these new hire numbers are very encouraging, many state child support agencies still have challenges getting employers to comply. Employers don’t respond to the state’s letters and calls. Others don’t understand the reporting requirement. In some cases, staff turnover causes reporting delays, or employers discover later that their vendor contracts don’t support new hire reporting services.

To help states improve compliance, OCSE conducted a pilot project involving employers we suspected were non-compliant. We wanted to see if they would respond favorably to a letter from a federal agency urging them to report their new hires. We also wanted to direct the employers to our website for resources that would educate them about the reporting process.

The outreach strategy:
We worked with 13 state child support agencies to conduct two new hire compliance outreach campaigns. To determine which employers to target, we used a strategic process.

1. We compared a recent quarterly wage report with the previous one.

2. When we found an employee in the recent quarter who was not reported in the previous quarter under the same Federal Employer Identification Number (FEIN), we identified them as a possible new hire.

3. We compared the possible new hires to 24 months of new hire records in the NDNH.

4. We listed the employers as potentially non-compliant if they failed to report those individuals as new hires. (Note that employers reporting new hires and quarterly wages under a different FEIN may appear as non-compliant.)

In August 2015 and July 2016, we mailed nearly 700 letters to employers that we suspected were non-compliant. A short time later, we contacted the ones who did not respond to our letter or did not begin reporting their new hires.

The outreach effort persuaded 67% of the employers to report new hires continuously. This showed that if we increase awareness by conducting a targeted outreach, communicating directly with employers, and providing resources about the requirement to report, we could increase compliance. States can launch their own campaign using the quarterly wage and new hire comparison methodology available on the Child Support Portal. The Employer Participation Project reports, which list suspected non-compliant employers for each state, are located under the State Statistical Report application.

For new hire reporting resources, visit our website. If your state would like more information about the Employer Participation Project reports or the compliance project, contact us at employerservices@acf.hhs.gov.

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